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SUBJECT: TUNISIAN SECURITY OPERATIONS: DETAILS BEGIN TO
EMERGE OF MAURITANIAN, SALAFIST INVOLVEMENT

REF: TUNIS 0016

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S/NF) Summary: According to local police contacts, the January 3 security operation that took place about 35 km southeast of Tunis (Reftel) resulted in the deaths of 12 perpetrators and the arrest of at least 25. The armed group, which was described as being comprised of Salafists and led by a Mauritanian, reportedly entered Tunisia via the Algerian border and intended to target destinations frequented by Western tourists, including Hammamet. Among the GOT casualties was a member of the quick response (SWAT) team normally assigned to protect the Embassy. Local media coverage of these incidents included an unusually critical editorial urging the authorities to tell the truth about the events. End Summary.

Situation Update

12. (S/NF) According to information the local police provided the Embassy today through RSO channels, 12 perpetrators were killed in the January 3 security operation in the southern suburbs on Tunis, and at least 25 arrested (Reftel). Local police estimate that at least 50-55 individuals were involved in this group. (Note: This number includes those arrested and killed in both the January 3 and December 23 incidents. End Note.) The leader of the group described as Salafists is purported to be Mauritanian. The group reportedly crossed the border from Algeria with the intent to create unrest throughout areas frequented by Western tourists, especially in the Hammamet beach resort area, but also possibly in Western retail stores, such as Carrefour and Geant. (Note: See septel for report of Embassy's Emergency Action Committee, which convened on January 4 to consider this information. End Note.) The following areas were also mentioned in relation to these events: Bir Bouregbaa (Hammamet North), Djebel Ressay and Meknassy, but the exact involvement of these areas was unclear.

13. (S/NF) According to this same information, the Tunisian police had been pursuing the group since December 23, with those involved focusing exclusively on this mission. Asked about the continuing existence of police checkpoints, the GOT explained that it cannot be assumed that the police checkpoints will be dismantled quickly, but that they will diminish as time passes. Security service contacts indicated that there are no specific threats against the US Embassy.

14. (S/NF) Local police informed Embassy that, in addition to the two Tunisian security forces reported injured in the December 23 incident, a member of the quick response (SWAT) team normally assigned to protect the Embassy was killed January 3 while on the mission in Soliman. The name of the deceased has not been formally released, and funeral plans are pending.

15. (C/NF) Police checkpoints are still in evidence, although at reduced levels. Two DAO teams conducted road reconnaissance missions on the afternoon of January 4 and found that checkpoints along the highway between Tunis and Hammamet had been removed. In addition, one team observed two Humvees and three trucks moving out of the Cap Bon peninsula. Police are still manning checkpoints in the greater Tunis area, however.

The Media Angle

16. (SBU) The Tunisian media continued its coverage of these incidents, with front page stories in most newspapers. Independent Arabic weekly Akhbar al-Joumhouriya published a critical editorial by Moncef Ben Mrad, who urged the authorities to tell the truth about the Hammam-Lif events, since Tunisians did not believe the initial press reports about a drug gang. He characterized the perpetrators as "religious extremists" whom Tunisian society should oppose. Government-owned, French daily La Presse was the only newspaper to publish the numbers of those killed and arrested in the January 3 operation: 12, and 15, respectively, according to that report. (Note: Other estimates indicate potentially much higher numbers for those arrested and killed. End Note.) The issue of numbers also came up in a

televised interview with Tunisian commentators that aired on al-Jazeera on January 3. Among those interviewed was the editor of the independent weekly al-Mawqif, Rachid Khachana. Contacted by the Embassy on January 4, Khachana reiterated his view that a Rubicon has been crossed in terms of the introduction of automatic weapons into the country. He also indicated that he had heard that the perpetrators include people from Mauritania and Algeria, along with Tunisians from Soliman, as well as Hammam-Lif and Hammam-Chatt.

Comment

17. (C) Although some of the details of these events remain unclear, these developments are truly extraordinary in the context of the tight control heretofore exercised by the GOT on all aspects of Tunisian society. Reports that Tunisian security forces have arrested or killed all of the perpetrators notwithstanding, we do not believe we have seen the end of this story. Given the apparent size and firepower of the group, we can only surmise that it enjoyed a significant support network, whether of like-minded Salafists or people who were bought off. Thus, we expect to see more arrests in the coming days and weeks. In addition, the incidents may well prompt Ben Ali to make changes in senior leadership positions.

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